DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 465 697 SO 033 900

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TITLE Becoming a Footnote to History: A Conversation with Morris Dees.
PUB DATE 2002-00-00
NOTE 10p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Beliefs; *Individual Development; Interviews; Social Cognition; *World Problems
IDENTIFIERS Biodata; *Dees (Morris); Moral Education; Moral Orientation; *Southern Poverty Law Center

ABSTRACT

For over 30 years, Morris Dees and his colleagues at the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) have worked to combat domestic fear and hate through litigation and education. In a 1998 interview, Dees shared his beliefs about how individuals and groups can make a positive difference, as well as the role history plays in identifying heroes. This paper introduces the work of Morris Dees, providing a review of his biography, a description of the Southern Poverty Law Center in Montgomery, Alabama, and some of his perspectives about current problems. The paper suggests that Morris Dees's ideas about violence and hate and ways of combating these problems are relevant to current international issues such as those raised by the events of September 11, 2001. It also suggests that Dees's views and the educational materials available through the SPLC will be helpful to many in the educational community. (BT)

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Becoming a Footnote to History: A Conversation with Morris Dees

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When we interviewed Morris Dees in1998 as part of a research study on moral leadership, the events of September 11, 2001 were not even to be imagined. A recent reading of the interview transcript brought to light his keen insights regarding topics of current, paramount importance: Issues such as civil liberties, moral courage, and the role of education in promoting peace and tolerance. For over 30 years, Dees and others at the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) have worked to combat domestic fear and hate through litigation and education. In his interview with us, he shared his beliefs about how individuals as well as groups can make a positive difference as well as the role history plays in identifying heroes.

In this article, we introduce the work of Morris Dees by providing a review of his biography, a description of the SPLC, and some of his perspectives shared in the interview. We believe his ideas about violence and hate and ways of combating these problems are relevant to current international issues such as those raised by the events of September 11, 2001. We also believe his views and the educational materials available through the SPLC will be helpful to many in the educational community.

Morris Dees is co-founder and chief trial counsel at the SPLC , a nonprofit organization based in Montgomery, Alabama. The SPLC was founded in 1971to protect and advance the legal and civil rights of disadvantaged people of all races through litigation and education. He and his law colleagues have handled more than 50 complex federal civil rights cases, many involving appeals to federal circuit courts and the United States Supreme Court.

Coretta Scott King, wife of Martin Luther King, Jr., said that Morris Dees is one of the most dedicated and effective civil rights lawyers in United States history. Dees is a

teacher as well as a lawyer. His teaching experience includes Gerry Spence's Trial Lawyers College and the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard. His publications include numerous articles and papers as well as six books. In November of 2001, the American Bar Association began a series of books about lawyers who are "visionaries, who inspire, or who are role models—individuals making a positive contribution to society and the legal system" (SPLC Report p.2). *A Lawyer's Story: The Morris Dees Story* is the first in this series of books.

The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) is a non-profit organization that uses education and litigation to help eliminate hate, intolerance, and discrimination. Its programs include Teaching Tolerance and the Intelligence Project. Teaching Tolerance is a national education project dedicated to offering free and low cost resources to help teachers foster equity, respect, and understanding in the classroom and beyond. The SPLC began the Teaching Tolerance project in 1991 in response to the alarming number of hate crimes among youth.

Teaching Tolerance magazine is distributed free twice a year to more than 600,000 educators throughout the US and in 70 other countries. The magazine spotlights educators, schools and curriculum resources dedicated to promoting respect for differences. It provides a national forum for sharing techniques and exploring new ideas in the areas of tolerance, diversity, and justice. Curriculum resources include the free videos and text teaching kits.

Talking with Morris Dees was a wonderful opportunity to see the civil rights movement through the eyes of a participant. He is a dynamic storyteller who brings history to life as he shares his rich experiences in a vivid and passionate way. As we talked, the topics that evolved included a discussion of what contributed to his decision to become a civil rights lawyer

working for the rights of the poor, his personal description of people with moral courage, the role of education in promoting tolerance, and how individuals can and do make a positive difference.

Dees credits his church upbringing and his parents as influences leading him to care about all people. Race and religion were not issues in his family. He said, "The reason I would probably wanted to go against the establishment and defend these people's rights is because I took seriously being a lawyer and I took serious my pledge to try to do justice." His firsthand experience of seeing discrimination at the University of Alabama also helped in his formation:

> They had just integrated and a young black girl came to try to get in the school and they beat her back with rocks and bricks and she didn't really get in; she had to leave. The mob of about 12,000 people came to the campus to keep her back for the first integration of Alabama, University of Alabama. They weren't integrating in 1963 when George Wallace stood in the schoolhouse door and didn't back down up there. But, in that particular case, I watched and observed and felt strong feelings for the underdog.

His early philosophies remain with him as he speaks at colleges and universities around the country. "I always say I think the only solution to this division we have between races and ethnic groups and gay and lesbians and others and gender differences and class differences is really going to be only solved when we learn to really love each other."

Sometimes it takes moral courage to "love each other." Dees was willing to note that those who display moral courage are those who are willing to go against the establishment with their views, to love their neighbor despite their own personal

disagreement with others' opinions. He talked quite openly about fellow attorney Gerry Spence as an example of someone who displayed moral courage.

> I think a lawyer like Gerry Spence who would represent Randy Weaver and Kevin Harris charged with killing two FBI agents, one FBI agent out in Ruby Ridge, Idaho even though Randy Weaver was a white separatist and Gerry Spence didn't agree with anything Randy Weaver stood for. He was willing to go out and represent him because Randy was not [represented].The FBI overreacted; Randy Weaver was perfectly within his rights to be up there on that hill top practicing his stupid neo–Nazi beliefs. Spence went there because he thought an injustice was being done.

Moral courage was also a quality he highlighted in his personal "all-time hero," Clarence Darrow. Reflecting on Darrow's accomplishments, he said that he was a "strong believer in fighting for justice and right, the underdog, the powerless, the helpless, against the rich and powerful. In my life, I like to say I stand up for the powerless against the powerful. It doesn't take much of a moral conviction to stand with the powerful."

Reflecting on his choices, it was not surprising to hear that he also wanted to include President F.D. Roosevelt as another person who displayed what he described as "enormous moral courage in the face of what today you might not think was difficult political times. But he had to go against an enormously established corporate hierarchy in America at the time in order to open up the American dream to people who had been denied because of numerous things not just the depression. He opened up an enormous amount of fronts."

Within the context of these examples Dees shared his belief that his university education made a significant difference in his life. However, for him education is holistic, "what parents do with their children, what the church, what the community, what civic leaders do. It's not just what you learn in school....that's educating people in a broad communal sense."

This sense of education is typified in his belief that history is a key component of any education.

> I think what's important is the students learn history. That's what I've been teaching as I've been going around....Because by history, you would understand what Dr. King did and what he was up against. You would see how our nation showed cowardice...in the face of Adolf Hitler because we didn't get into that war until we had to.

Perhaps what Dees is trying to say is that those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat their mistakes. Learning is an ongoing process. While this process may be expedited by television, radio, and the Internet, it is still dependent on the people whose lives create the "moments." Each of us is given opportunities throughout our lives to make choices that will define those "moments." For good or bad, we are the ones who will choose how history will be written.

Dees reminds us that people can make a difference, sometimes even when they are not always aware of it.

> Well, I think who knows who's looking at you. And obviously, at this stage of my life I get a lot letters from people. You know that line out of The Rhinestone Cowboy. I get letters and cards from people I don't even know. They attribute

going to law school because of seeing the things I've done, reading my books and things. They ask me to write letters they can read to their little child when the child gets older. It makes you feel funny, but people are obviously looking at what you're doing.

As a country or as individuals, people are always looking at us. And how history will remember us is defined by how we see history. Dees believes people have a way of seeing history as some distant thing. But he adds history may be what is happening in the present.

History is nothing more than just a reflection of what happened at a given point of time, but history is being made every day. What a lot of people don't think of is it takes great heroes to make history. It takes individuals who, the great Thomas Jeffersons, the John Adams and all those people. John Adams was just a young lawyer in Boston. Like so many young lawyers all over America, but he took a stand…I'm sure the young lawyer who represented the freed slaves from Amistad, we see the movie today, and we think boy that was brilliant foresight he had. He's just a guy who didn't like an injustice and fought like hell to make sure the slaves didn't get returned back to the Queen Isabella.

These history lessons are important to Dees, especially for young people.

Young people need to understand they are history every day and you can be a footnote to history if you want to, and most of us really are. You can also do your bit. You don't plan to do things historic. You do what you're going to do and history has to make a judgment as to whether it had any merit or not."

As we said in the beginning of this article, which now in retrospect has become more of a reflection, our conversation with Morris Dees helped provide us with a lens with which to view the events of September 11th. In addition, it also gave us a framework with which to understand how we can choose to react to these events. Dees modeled for us what one person can do by facing fear and hate with the moral courage to say, "I can change history." We can allow ourselves to simmer in the juices of vengeance or we can teach tolerance, forgiveness, and understanding. We can leave our mark on history with pain and suffering or we can make our mark through love and understanding.

References

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